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World Champion Cowgirl Loves Horses and Shooting

*By Joseph P. Tartaro
President, Second Amendment Foundation*

They don't make training wheels for horses or guns. However, if a youngster has a desire to master either or both, they can do so with the proper supervision and support from loving and attentive parents and teachers. Melissa Dragoo of Scottsdale, AZ, is a role model for any child who wants to reach for her or his dreams as she has.

She started riding horses at age 4 and shot her first firearm at age 6. Now, at age 14, she is a perennial contender in any Cowboy Mounted Shooting Association (CMSA) competition. Amazingly, she won the 2007 CMSA World Champion Cowgirl title at age 13, and was two-tenths of a second out of first place in the 2006 World Championship at age 12. And she holds a host of first place finishes in a number of over cowboy mounted events dating back to 2002.

She does all this by racking up the best time and accuracy score while riding one of her two Quarter horses at breakneck speed through a series of CMSA competition patterns. Her run through each pattern while shooting at balloons takes anywhere from 15 to 35 seconds in actual time, but there are penalties added for missing balloons, breaking a rule, dropping a gun, falling off a horse or safety infractions. Several such runs per day are standard in a typical three-day CMSA competition, which will attract hundreds of competitors and spectators.

Mounted shooting with revolver or rifle is like barrel racing with balloons in between the barrels. The rider breaks balloons with blackpowder blank cartridges fired from .45 caliber pistols, and is scored on accuracy and time.

"I just love this sport," Melissa says. "And I have always loved anything to do with horses."

Melissa shoots a brace of Ruger Vaquero revolvers with such success that she has become a spokesperson for the Southport, CT, gunmaker. It was in a Ruger booth at the National Rifle Association's annual meeting and exhibits in Louisville, KY, last May when I first met Melissa. She was sharing a table with Kelly Glenn, a professional hunting guide who has been a Ruger spokesperson for many years and was a former W&G covergirl. There were loads of men, women and children lining up to meet the two women and get an autographed picture or poster.

Melissa is the youngest of four children in a family headed by Doug and Elizabeth Dragoo, real estate developers in Arizona. She has an older brother, David, 23, a married sister, Mary Francis, 24, and another sister, Betsy, 18. Melissa not only launched her own career in this fast-paced sport, that's really two sports in one, but she got her mother involved as well.



Melissa shoots two Ruger Vaquero .45 Colts with Eagle Grips in competition. Her rig is from Cactus Custom Saddlery. The guns are both holstered to the strong side so they can be drawn and fired with the same hand. (Photo by John Beckett)

"As parents, we've always tended to get involved with any sport one of our children got serious about," said Elizabeth. "So why not mounted cowboy shooting?"

"I'm not as good as Melissa," she added, "but I'm having a great time."

Melissa is a sophomore at Notre Dame Prep school and is a "great student" according to her mother. Speaking with Melissa is a refreshing experience. She doesn't sound like the average pre-teen or teenager. She expresses herself well and in complete sentences, without the common nuances of the average high school student her age.

When asked about Melissa's other hobbies, Elizabeth said her daughter "hunts, fly fishes, rides motorcycles, eats and competes in track and field."

Startled by her inclusion of eating as a hobby, I asked Elizabeth about it.

"With her eating is a hobby," she said with a laugh.

Actually, mother and daughter spend a lot of quality time together in the kitchen.



Melissa and her mother, Elizabeth, spend a lot of quality time together, in the kitchen, cleaning their shootin' irons, and competing in the same CMSA events. (Photos by John Beckett)

Melissa is a good student, her mother said. She rides and exercises her horses every afternoon after school, then does her homework after dinner.

Melissa expects to go to college after high school graduation.

"Right now, I think I'd like to study equine medicine and/or ranch management," Melissa said.

Cowboy mounted shooting isn't a sport for every family. Besides the cost of equipment and horse care (many shooters board their horses), there's the time.

"With, say, soccer," Elizabeth explains, "you pile in the car for an hour or so. With cowboy mounted shooting, you're talking about devoting three or four days for each event."

Melissa has two horses, Slapshot, on which she won the championship, and Broadway, which she is still training for competition. The CMSA rules say that any horse or mule is eligible to compete, but not every horse will adapt to the kind of quick stops, starts, turns and the noise of the guns. Quarter horses like Melissa's and her mother's are most like those used by real cowpokes and seem adaptable and trainable to the kind of riding required in competition.

"The cartridges fired in CMSA competition are blackpowder blanks," according to Melissa, and will break a balloon up to about 15 feet from the muzzle. Live rounds are strictly prohibited at competitions.

At each event, one person loads the rider's guns as he or she enters the arena, and another person unloads the guns after the rider is finished. Riders do not carry loaded guns outside of the arena or when not competing.

What about gun leather? Riders can buy 'off-the-shelf replicas' of the old time gun belts and holsters. Or, you can have custom-made gun belts and holsters to suit your wishes. There are several custom makers that you can find in "old west" magazines or on our CMSA Links page.

Safety in horse training and firearm handling are emphasized at all times in CMSA events. Many clubs sponsor clinics to assist new shooters in starting their horses and learning the basics of safe firearm handling. Range masters are in the arena at all times during competitions to insure safe

riding and shooting is exercised. New shooters are usually required to demonstrate that they have achieved minimum acceptable levels of riding and shooting skills.

There are 50+ possible patterns for each run. The patterns everyone will ride can be pre-determined or can be drawn out of a hat on the day of the competition. A competition may consist of 3 to 6 patterns a day. Each pattern consists of 10 balloons. To give you an idea of riding a pattern, let's say that there are 5 white balloons and 5 red balloons. The 5 white balloons may be grouped together in one place or spread out over the entire arena. The rider shoots all 5 white balloons first. Then, the rider holsters the first gun while riding to the far end of the arena, draws the second gun, and shoots the 5 red balloons, which are usually 5 in a row straight towards the finish line. This is called "the Rundown."

There are skill levels and classes in CMSA. There are men's and women's divisions, plus male and female youth divisions and a senior group. There is also a Wrangler class for those 11 and under, and junior men's and junior women's divisions. Within each division shooters are ranked in classes from level 1 up to 6. All riders start at Class 1. When a rider wins Class 1 twice, they advance to Class 2, and when they win Class 2 three times, they advance to Class 3. Four wins at Class 3 moves them to Class 4, etc.

"Melissa has just been put in Junior Ladies 5, and is the only competitor so ranked," Elizabeth proudly told me in a recent phone conversation. Young children in the "Wrangler" class ride the same pattern that the grown-ups do, but they may shoot Hollywood cap pistols, engaging each target as if they were shooting real blanks. They then shoot the real McCoy with blanks at balloons while standing stationary on the ground with mom or dad at their side.

For more information about the Cowboy Mounted Shooting sport, the national events which are held each year as far west as Arizona and Idaho and as far east as Ohio and Tennessee, and the location of clubs in your state, visit the CMSA website: cowboymountedshooting.com, or phone: 480-683-0485.